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SUBJECT: SCANDAL IN ISKANDARIYAH: BABIL PC MEDDLING IN
MUNICIPALITIES

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Using the Babil Province Council (PC), SCIRI (Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq) political meddling in northern Babil local politics is on the rise, notably at the expense of secular and mixed Shi'a-Sunni city governments. The recent move to disband the mixed Iskandariyah Nahia (city council) exemplifies this trend. During a conversation Deputy PC Chair Ameerah Abid Salman Al-Biaty informed the Babil IPAO that PC involvement in local governments would continue and that the PC's order dissolving the Iskandariyah City Council will stand. Particularly if the PC encounters minimal resistance to such political maneuvering in Iskandariyah, the fate of all municipalities not controlled by SCIRI becomes questionable. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) The initial controversy stems from the Babil PC's January interim appointment of Abbass Khafaji, a SCIRI party member and supporter of Babil Governor Al-Musalemaawi, as Mayor of Iskandariyah. According to some accounts, the City Council objected to the selection, alleging that the PC did not have the legal authority under CPA Order 71 to unilaterally assign individuals to political positions without the explicit consent of the Council. Despite initial protests, Khafaji assumed his position and quickly began to exploit it for his own economic advantage, according to U.S. military reporting. One rumor charges that the Mayor even filled his coffer by personally collecting fines from parking violators. In response, the City Council initiated a lawsuit against the PC for what it terms the illegal dissolution of the Council and on May 6 voted unanimously to dismiss the Mayor.

¶3. (C) Deputy PC Chair Al-Biaty offered a wholly different rendition of events, arguing that the PC was compelled to appoint Khafaji as Mayor in January and ultimately take charge of the Iskandariyah Nahia due to the Council's egregious mismanagement of the city. The PC received approximately "3,000 direct complaints" from the residents of Iskandariyah, according to Al-Biaty, and the District government itself recommended the termination of the Council. However, she backtracked a bit, claiming that the PC did not actually dissolve the Council but only ordered it to stand-down until new elections could be held on June 2.

¶4. (C) Noticeably irritated by the conversation, Al-Biaty further stressed that the PC intended to systematically investigate all other city governments in the Province, and if similar problems of inadequate administration were unearthed, such councils would be dealt with harshly. One council that she specifically mentioned during the discussion was the Jurfalskhar Nahia (a northern Babil municipality with a large Sunni population), which she made clear faces imminent termination.

Al-Biaty further admonished, "do not talk to the members of the City Council, they are very bad people." When asked exactly what this meant she retorted, "Do you not want us to dissolve them?"

15. COMMENT: (C) The outcome of this controversy still remains unclear, but the PC is undoubtedly determined to establish friendly city governments and marginalize any non-SCIRI bases of political power. Sunni participants in northern local governments will likely view PC meddling in local city governments through the prism of sectarianism-seeing it as Shi'a Islamist politicians marginalizing Sunnis in their home region. The Babil PC's recent actions in Iskandariyah may also increase the already high levels of violence in northern Babil by making Sunnis feel removed from the political process in the local arena. Although the Iskandariyah City Council intends to challenge the PC's disbandment order in the courts, SCIRI-directed attacks on Sunni or mixed Shi'a-Sunni city councils in northern Babil will likely exacerbate an already tense (and kinetic) security environment south of Baghdad. END COMMENT.

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